



External Review

Educational Service Unit #17

Mr. Dennis L Radford, Administrator
207 N Main St
Ainsworth, NE 69210-1353

Mr. Michael A Bugenski, Lead Evaluator

Date: April 21, 2013 - April 24, 2013

Copyright ©2013 by Advance Education, Inc. AdvancED grants to the Institution, which is the subject of the External Review Team Report, and its designees and stakeholders a non-exclusive, perpetual, irrevocable, royalty-free license and release to reproduce, reprint and distribute this report in accordance with and as protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States of America and all foreign countries. All other rights not expressly conveyed are reserved by AdvancED.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction to the External Review Process.....	1
Part I: Findings.....	2
Accreditation Standards and Indicators.....	2
Part II: Conclusion.....	15
Summary of the External Review.....	15
Required Actions.....	18
Part III: Addenda.....	20
Next Steps.....	20
Celebrating Accreditation.....	20
About AdvancED.....	20

Introduction to the External Review Process

Accreditation is a voluntary method of quality assurance developed more than 100 years ago by American universities and secondary schools, and designed primarily to distinguish schools adhering to a set of educational standards. Today the accreditation process is used at all levels of education, and is recognized for its ability to effectively drive student performance and continuous improvement in education.

Institutions seeking to gain or retain accreditation must meet AdvancED standards specified for their institution, demonstrate high levels of or improvement of student performance if applicable, and provide evidence of stakeholder satisfaction with the operation of the institution. The accreditation standards focus on conditions and processes within a system that impact student performance and organizational effectiveness. The power of AdvancED Performance Accreditation lies in the connections and linkages between and among the standards, student performance, and stakeholder feedback.

Institutions participate in an External Review by a team of highly qualified evaluators who examine the institution's adherence and commitment to the accreditation criteria. The External Review is the hallmark of AdvancED Performance Accreditation as it energizes and equips the leadership and stakeholders of an institution to achieve higher levels of performance and address those areas that may be hindering efforts to reach desired performance levels. External Review is a rigorous process that includes examination of evidence and relevant data, interviews with stakeholders, and observations of instruction, learning, and operations.

The AdvancED External Review Team used the AdvancED Accreditation Standards and Indicators and related criteria to guide its evaluation, looking not only for adherence to standards, but also for how the institution functioned as a whole and embodied the practices and characteristics of quality.

Using the evidence at their disposal, the AdvancED External Review Team arrived at a set of findings contained in this report. The report is presented in three sections: Findings, Conclusion, and Addenda.

Part I: Findings

The Findings section presents the External Review Team's evaluation of the AdvancED Accreditation Standards and Indicators. It also includes Powerful Practices and Opportunities for Improvement identified by the External Review Team, observations of the Learning Environment, as well as Required Actions.

Accreditation Standards and Indicators

Standards help to delineate what matters. They provide a common language through which an education community can engage in conversations about educational improvement, system effectiveness, and achievement. They serve as a foundation for planning and implementing improvement strategies and activities and for measuring success. AdvancED's Standards for Quality were developed by a committee comprised of effective educators and leaders from the fields of practice, research, and policy who applied professional wisdom, deep knowledge of effective practice, and the best available research to craft a set of robust standards that ensure excellence and continuous improvement. The standards were reviewed by internationally recognized experts in testing and measurement, teacher quality, and education research.

This section contains an evaluation of each of AdvancED's Accreditation Standards and Indicators, conclusions concerning Powerful Practices and Opportunities for Improvement related to each of the standards, and a description of the evidence examined by the External Review Team. Indicators are evaluated and rated individually by the External Review Team using a four-level performance rubric. The Standard Performance Level is the average of indicator scores for the standard.

Standard 1: Purpose and Direction

Purpose and direction are critical to successful institutions. A study conducted in 2010 by the London-based Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) reported that "in addition to improving performance, the research indicates that having a sense of shared purpose also improves employee engagement" and that "...lack of understanding around purpose can lead to demotivation and emotional detachment, which in turn lead to a disengaged and dissatisfied workforce."

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution commits to a shared purpose and direction and establishes expectations for student learning aligned with the institutions' vision that is supported by internal and external stakeholders. These expectations serve as the focus for assessing student performance and overall institution effectiveness.

Standard	Standard Performance Level
----------	----------------------------

External Review

Educational Service Unit #17

The agency maintains and communicates at all levels of the organization a purpose and direction for continuous improvement that commits to providing programs and services, active learning, and high expectations for professional practice as well as shared values and beliefs.			3.0
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
1.1	The agency engages in a systematic, inclusive, and comprehensive process to review, revise, and communicate an agency purpose.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Observations•Documentation, minutes, or description of the process for creating the agency's purpose including the role of stakeholders•Examples of communications to stakeholders about the agency's purpose (i.e., website, newsletters, annual report)•Accreditation Report•Survey results•Interviews•Purpose statements – past and present	3
1.2	The agency leadership and staff at all levels commit to a culture that is based on shared values and beliefs that include provision of relevant and targeted educational programs and services, equitable support, active engagement in learning, application of knowledge and skills, and high expectations for professional practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Accreditation Report•Observations•Interviews	2
1.3	Leadership of the agency implements a continuous improvement process that provides clear direction for improving conditions that support learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Observations•Agency profile•Interviews•Survey results•Agenda, minutes from continuous improvement planning meetings•Accreditation Report	4

Opportunities for Improvement

Indicator

1. Promote best practices in instruction that will increase student engagement.

1.2

Interview with teachers at the local district level indicated a need for professional development programs that focus on student engagement and include a review of best practice research in the area of instructional improvement. The need to improve student engagement was expressed by staff throughout the visits to local schools. Through the use of the MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) Assessment program there is great potential to assist schools in enhancing the delivery of academic programs. Increasing student engagement and involvement in the learning process have a direct impact on student learning.

Standard 2: Governance and Leadership

Governance and leadership are key factors in raising institutional quality. Leaders, both local administrators and governing boards/authorities, are responsible for ensuring all learners achieve while also managing many other facets of an institution. Institutions that function effectively do so without tension between the governing board/authority, administrators, and educators and have established relationships of mutual respect and a shared vision (Feuerstein & Opfer, 1998). In a meta-analysis of school leadership research, Leithwood & Sun (2012) found that leaders (school and governing boards/authority) can significantly "influence school conditions through their achievement of a shared vision and agreed-on goals for the organization, their high expectations and support of organizational members, and practices that strengthen school culture and foster collaboration within the organization." With the increasing demands of accountability placed on institutional leaders, leaders who empower others need considerable autonomy and involve their school communities to attain school improvement goals. Leaders who engage in such practices experience a greater level of success (Fink & Brayman, 2006). Similarly, governing boards/authorities that focus on policy-making are more likely to allow school leaders the autonomy to make decisions that impact teachers and students and are less responsive to politicization than boards/authorities that respond to vocal citizens (Greene, 1992).

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution has leaders who are advocates for the institution's vision and improvement efforts. The leaders provide direction and allocate resources to implement curricular and co-curricular programs that enable students to achieve expectations for their learning. Leaders encourage collaboration and shared responsibility for school improvement among stakeholders. The institution's policies, procedures, and organizational conditions ensure equity of learning opportunities and support for innovation.

Standard			Standard Performance Level
The agency operates under governance and leadership that promote and support student performance and agency effectiveness.			3.17
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
2.1	The governing body establishes policies and support practices that ensure effective administration of the agency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Observations •Interviews •Accreditation Report •Agency policies, procedures, and practices including any related to learning experiences, professional growth and fiscal management 	4

2.2	The governing body operates responsibly and functions effectively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •List of professional learning offerings for governing body and individual members •Interviews •Governing body code of ethics •Accreditation Report •Governing body policies on roles and responsibilities, conflict of interest •Observations 	3
2.3	The governing body ensures that agency leadership has the autonomy to meet established goals and to manage day-to-day operations effectively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Observations •Accreditation Report •Interviews •Written descriptions of roles and responsibilities of board and of agency leadership 	4
2.4	Leadership and staff throughout the agency foster a culture consistent with the agency's purpose and direction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Observations •Examples of decisions aligned with the agency's statement of purpose •Accreditation Report •Examples of collective accountability for agency effectiveness •Interviews •Examples of leadership support of innovation, collaboration, shared leadership, and professional growth 	3
2.5	Leadership engages stakeholders effectively in support of the agency's purpose and direction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Minutes from meetings with stakeholders •Observations •Feedback mechanisms from stakeholders with examples •Survey results •Accreditation Report •Examples of opportunities for stakeholders to shape decisions, have meaningful leadership roles, work collaboratively on improvement efforts •Representative communications with stakeholders •Interviews 	3

2.6	The agency's supervision and evaluation processes result in improved professional practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Observations •Examples of professional development offerings and plans tied specifically to the results from supervision and evaluation •Brief description of supervision and evaluation process •Accreditation Report •Policies on supervision and evaluation •Interviews 	2
-----	---	--	---

Standard 3: Teaching and Assessing for Learning

A high-quality and effective system has services, practices, and curriculum that ensure teacher effectiveness. Research has shown that an effective teacher is a key factor for learners to achieve to their highest potential and be prepared for a successful future. The positive influence an effective educator has on learning is a combination of "student motivation, parental involvement" and the "quality of leadership" (Ding & Sherman, 2006). Research also suggests that quality educators must have a variety of quantifiable and intangible characteristics, which include strong communication skills, knowledge of content, and knowledge of how to teach the content. The school's curriculum and instructional program should develop learners' skills that lead them to think about the world in complex ways (Conley, 2007) and prepare them to have knowledge that extends beyond the academic areas. In order to achieve these goals, teachers must have pedagogical skills as well as content knowledge (Baumert et al, 2010). The acquisition and refinement of teachers' pedagogical skills occur most effectively through collaboration and professional development. These are a "necessary approach to improving teacher quality" (Colbert et al, 2008). According to Marks, Louis, & Printy (2002), school staff that engage in "active organizational learning also have higher achieving students in contrast to those that do not." Likewise, a study conducted by Horng, Klasik, & Loeb (2010), concluded that leadership in effective schools, "supports teachers by creating collaborative work environments." Institutional leaders have a responsibility to provide experiences, resources, and time for educators to engage in meaningful professional learning that promotes student learning and educator quality.

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution implements a curriculum based on clear and measurable expectations for student learning that provides opportunities for all students to acquire requisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Teachers use proven instructional practices that actively engage students in the learning process. Teachers provide opportunities for students to apply their knowledge and skills to real world situations. Teachers give students feedback to improve their performance.

Standard	Standard Performance Level
----------	----------------------------

External Review

Educational Service Unit #17

The agency's services and programs support the educational needs of its constituent schools/systems through meaningful professional learning experiences.			2.67
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
3.1	The agency provides equitable, relevant and targeted support programs and/or services for all schools/systems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•List of support programs and/or services provided to each constituent school/system•Evidence that learning experiences have prepared learners for success•Accreditation Report•Interviews•Explanations of how learning activities are tied to needs of schools/systems•Observations	3
3.2	The agency monitors its programs and services to measure effectiveness and to guide ongoing adjustments in delivery.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Accreditation Report•Examples of adjustments to programs and services in response to data findings•Observations•Description of agency monitoring system for programs and services including those involved•Interviews	2
3.3	Agency staff provide professional learning opportunities that engage practitioners in their learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Examples of practitioner use of technologies as learning tools•Accreditation Report•Survey results•Observations•List of professional learning offerings•Examples of instructional strategies used to engage practitioners in learning•Interviews•Examples of practitioner learning demonstrating the application of knowledge, authentic assessments	3

External Review

Educational Service Unit #17

3.4	The agency uses collaboration as an essential operating principle in the development and delivery of its services and programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Schedules/examples of collaborative learning community meetings within the agency•Observations•Survey results•Accreditation Report•Schedules/examples of collaboration with constituent schools/systems•Interviews	2
3.5	All agency staff members participate in a continuous program of professional learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Accreditation Report•Recent evaluations of professional learning activities•Survey results•Interviews•Observations•Listing of professional learning activities in the last 3 years with brief explanation of connection to agency purpose, direction, and needs	3
3.6	The agency's support services meet the unique learning needs of its constituent schools/systems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Data used to identify learning needs of constituent schools/systems•Observations•Survey results•Examples of provision of unique support services to constituent schools/systems•Accreditation Report•Interviews	3

Opportunities for Improvement

Indicator

1. Provide assistance to all districts by using data analysis to improve instruction, increase student engagement, and monitor program effectiveness. 3.2

The fact that the agency has access to both MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) data NeSA (Nebraska Student Achievement) allows the agency to assist schools in focusing on specific curricular and instructional changes that will measure academic progress. While the role of the agency is one of providing assistance and guidance, it was noted that the use of best practice research in leading local districts through continuous improvement process was a need expressed by some local district personnel. The agency has the ability to lead through the review of best practices and research and has the potential to introduce innovative practices to its constituents and impact instruction at the classroom level.

2. Develop a collaborative work relationship through the use of a formal needs assessment. 3.4

While needs of the local districts are assessed informally, an opportunity to expand an formally survey and use focus interviews with principals, teachers and support staff can expand collaborations and develop expanded opportunities for support service and professional/staff development programs.

3. Implement a system of personalized communication and clear expectations between and among agency stakeholders and staff. 3.4

While email communication is a preferred method of communication, a more direct and personalized approach would assist in the management of relationships. The use of text messages, notes and personalize communication such as a technology newsletter, instructional pod casts create an opportunity for expanding interest and participation in agency programs and services. While relationships are very strong and personal, the objective of increasing communication fosters new ideas and creativity among the educational communities.

Standard 4: Resources and Support Systems

Institutions, regardless of their size, need access to sufficient resources and systems of support to be able to engage in sustained and meaningful efforts that result in a continuous improvement cycle. Indeed, a study conducted by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (Pan, 2003) "demonstrated a strong relationship between resources and student success...both the level of resources and their explicit allocation seem to affect educational outcomes."

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution has sufficient human, material, and fiscal resources to implement a curriculum that enables students to achieve expectations for student learning, to meet special needs, and to comply with applicable regulations. The institution employs and allocates staffs who are well qualified for their assignments. The institution provides a safe learning environment for students and staff. The institution provides ongoing learning opportunities for all staff to improve their effectiveness. The institution ensures compliance with applicable governmental regulations.

Standard	Standard Performance Level
----------	----------------------------

External Review

Educational Service Unit #17

The agency provides resources, programs and services that support its purpose and direction for all constituent schools/systems.			3.17
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
4.1	The agency engages in a systematic process to recruit, employ, and retain a sufficient number of qualified professional and support staff to fulfill their roles and responsibilities and support the purpose and direction of the agency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Survey results•Policies, processes, and procedures and other documentation related to the hiring, placement, and retention of staff•Interviews•Agency budgets over the last 3 years•Observations•Accreditation Report•Needs assessments related to hiring needs•Review of internal document including audit reports and auditors management letters.	4
4.2	Material and fiscal resources are sufficient to support the purpose and direction of the agency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Interviews•Observations•Survey results•Examples of how identified needs of constituent schools/systems are met through agency's material and fiscal resources•Examples of how material and fiscal resources support purpose and direction of agency•Accreditation Report•Examples of efforts to improve agency effectiveness•Demonstrations of equitable allocation of resources to constituents	4
4.3	The agency maintains facilities, services, and equipment to provide a safe, clean, and healthy environment for all.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Interviews•Accreditation Report•Observations•Documentation of compliance with local and state requirements•Maintenance schedules•Security systems	3

4.4	The agency demonstrates strategic resource management that includes long-range planning in support of the purpose and direction of the agency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Observations •Interviews •Agency strategic plan •Policies and procedures for resource management •Accreditation Report •Board monitoring process to ensure implementation and completion of strategic plans •Planning process for managing budgets, facilities, and other agency components 	3
4.5	The agency provides, coordinates, and evaluates the effectiveness of programs and services delivered to constituent schools and systems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Observations •Accreditation Report •Agency system for evaluating programs and services to constituent schools/systems •Interviews 	2
4.6	The agency provides technology infrastructure and equipment to support the teaching, informational, and operational needs of the agency and the schools/systems it serves.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Technology plan •Technology budget •Job descriptions of technical support staff •Policies and procedures related to technology use and technology needs 	3

Powerful Practices

Indicator

1. The Collaboration with the NNNC Northeast Nebraska Network Consortium enables a regional partnership that has produced a cost savings program that has expanded program opportunities and services that benefit all constituent districts.

4.2

Essential technology support services include: infrastructure connectivity, security, management of data, distance education and video streaming. The agency's membership in the collaborative network provides a cost savings benefit that allows resources to maximize services and opportunities for each classroom in the service area. Interviews with local district staff continually expressed appreciation for the amount of fiscal resources that are preserved through the work of the agency and participation in the Consortium. Collaborative programming has a impact on each district as indicated by the interviews and artifacts reviewed. As resources decline the collaborative networking process benefits all stakeholders by stretching resources.

2. The agency has made a substantial investment and improvement in its delivery of Distance Learning and Collaboration throughout the service area and the state of Nebraska.

4.6

RADVISION, the Multipoint Conferencing System Unit was demonstrated to be a highly functional "state of the art" system that enables high quality interaction and learning opportunities for students and staff. The system is used by other ESUs in Nebraska and is highly reliable and adds substantially to high quality meetings and overcoming the challenge of distance throughout the service area. The time and travel savings alone are substantial and create distance learning opportunities are valuable. Meetings that require travel are reduced as evidenced by the high number of conferences and meetings held via the system. Distance Learning and Collaboration are a way of life throughout the service area. A review of artifacts reveals a high usage factor with substantial increases in the use of the technology. The challenges of distance and time are overcome by direct communications and the use of this technology.

Opportunities for Improvement

Indicator

1. Develop a consistent protocol for agency personnel that identify and clarify expectations for service delivery.

4.5

A variety of practices exist among agency staff when providing direct services to local districts. While distance and travel time remain a significant challenge for all agency staff, having clear expectations regarding scope of work, time and hours spent between agency staff and local district staff create a clear understanding of service delivery. Interviews with stakeholders indicated that on some occasions there were not clear expectations regarding availability of agency staff. Clear expectations regarding service delivery will impact the overall efficiency of services.

Standard 5: Using Results for Continuous Improvement

Systems with strong improvement processes are moving beyond anxiety about the current reality and focusing on priorities and initiatives for the future. Using results, that is, data and other information, to guide continuous improvement is key to an institution's success. A study conducted by Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter (2007) from the Center on Educational Governance at the University of Southern California indicated that data can shed light on existing areas of strength and weakness and also guide improvement strategies in a systematic and strategic manner (Dembosky et al., 2005). The study also identified six key strategies that performance-driven systems use: (1) building a foundation for data-driven decision making; (2) establishing a culture of data use and continuous improvement; (3) investing in an information management system; (4) selecting the right data; (5) building school capacity for data-driven decision making; and (6) analyzing and acting on data to improve performance. Other research studies, though largely without comparison groups, suggested that data-driven decision making has the potential to increase student performance (Alwin, 2002; Doyle, 2003; Lafee, 2002; McIntire, 2002).

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution uses a comprehensive assessment system based on clearly defined performance measures. The system is used to assess student performance on expectations for student learning, evaluate the effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, and determine strategies to improve student performance. The institution implements a collaborative and ongoing process for improvement that aligns the functions of the school with the expectations for student learning. Improvement efforts are

sustained, and the institution demonstrates progress in improving student performance and institution effectiveness.

Standard			Standard Performance Level
The agency implements a comprehensive evaluation system that generates a range of data about the effectiveness of the agency and uses the results to guide continuous improvement.			2.0
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
5.1	The agency establishes and maintains a clearly defined and comprehensive evaluation system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Accreditation Report •In-service evaluations •Action Plans, including assessments used to measure progress •Interviews •Annual Report to stakeholders – past and present •Calendars/Schedules •Agency Profile document 	2
5.2	Professional and support staff throughout the agency continuously collect, analyze and use a range of data sources, including comparison and trend data related to program evaluation and organizational conditions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Accreditation Report •Interviews •Policy or procedures for agency's in-service registration system •Orientation manual for new staff documenting data procedures •Student achievement data in the agency's region – summarized with trends noted •Observations •Goals and action plans for individual agency departments and programs •Needs assessments conducted by the agency 	2

External Review

Educational Service Unit #17

5.3	The agency's leadership monitors and communicates comprehensive information about learning and the achievement of agency improvement goals to stakeholders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Accreditation Report•Interviews•Newsletters, paper or on-line•Agency website•Communication plans•Observations•Examples of reports/presentations to governing board and advisory groups•Annual reports to stakeholders•Documentation of continuous improvement plans, goals and action plans	2
-----	---	--	---

Part II: Conclusion

Summary of the External Review

In off-site and on-site review sessions, the AdvancED External Review Team examined artifacts and evidence provided by the institution. During the on-site portion of the review, the team reviewed additional artifacts, collected and analyzed data from interviews, and conducted observations.

A five member team conducted an External Review for Educational Service Unit 17 in Ainsworth Nebraska on April 21, 2013 through April 24 2013, for the purpose of reviewing the system's Internal Review and achieving systems accreditation as an Educational Service Agency. To begin the review experience, the team held an offsite conference call/orientation/training meeting where initial feedback was shared based on information provided to the team prior to arrival. The agency provided an extensive collection of evidence on line through the use of a wiki that provided links to all of the evidence that validated their internal evaluation of each of the standards.

ESU 17 provided the visiting team with a very open and honest self-appraisal sharing numerous artifacts and evidence to validate their process of Internal Review. The agency was well prepared for the visit and expressed the hope that the visiting team would produce a report that would assist the agency in its efforts to continuously improve.

During the on-site portion of the review, the team reviewed additional artifacts, collected and analyzed data from interviews, and visited each of the five districts served by the agency. The team visited Cody-Kilgore, Keya Paha, Valentine, Ainsworth, Rock County School Districts.

A work session was held late Sunday afternoon upon the team's arrival. The superintendent, board members and district staff hosted a dinner to provide an official welcome to the team.

During the external review process the team was able to complete a review of artifacts and documentation provided to the team, hold interviews with multiple groups of stakeholder and engage in team discussions. Interviews were held with 61 stakeholders, including: 5 members of the board of directors, 5 local superintendents, 4 building principals, 43 teachers/certified staff, and 4 parent/community representatives. All stakeholder groups interviewed were open with dialogue in identifying both strengths and areas for improvement.

The agency administrator who serves as the chief operating officer presented an overview of the district and identified specific initiatives and changes. The agency leadership team presented an overview of the standards and the process used by the agency during the self-assessment process used while seeking ESA accreditation.

The team concluded the review with an exit report to the ESA 17 administrators and staff.

Using the evidence collected, the team engaged in dialogue and deliberations concerning the degree to which the institution met the AdvancED Accreditation Standards and Indicators.

The agency has constructed a process to review, revise and communicate their purpose statement. This process included direct involvement of agency staff and indirectly stakeholder staff. Stakeholders for this agency are staff from the schools they serve including teachers and administrators. Agency Leadership team members displayed a belief in establishment of a culture for learning. The agency engages staff and stakeholders in the application and learning of knowledge and skills that are pertinent to their roles and responsibilities. The leadership of the agency commits to a continuous improvement process to provide clarity and support for actions with school districts. Interviews with both agency and local district staff members continually referred to the agency as totally committed to providing whatever it is that districts need to accomplish the mission of the district.

The agency has formulated a comprehensive collection of governing board policies that facilitate effective administrative and staff practices, fosters a culture of partnering and collaboration, and provides agency leadership with the autonomy to meet agency goals and manage agency operations. The policies have been reviewed and updated regularly since 2010 as evidence by board minutes.

Evidence from interviews with constituent groups and staff and data collected from constituent surveys indicate stakeholders actively support the agency purpose, direction, and culture. Each year local districts commit contract with the agency for staff and services. Over half of the agency annual budget is based on services that local districts purchase.

Interviews with local district staff indicate a defined process used by the agency to provide equitable, relevant and targeted support. The agency provides technology support to the districts on site, nursing services and special education services on a contracted service basis with the local district providing the salary and benefits for agency staff based on the usage factor. Some agency staff are assigned part time with defined days and hours. Other agency staff may be assigned full time to a local district.

The agency monitors its programs and services and evaluates programs on an informal basis and is vigilant in making adjustments in service delivery. Interviews with constituents demonstrate that the agency knows teachers on a personal level and report it is easier to determine needs. When services are provided on site it ensures the engagement of teachers.

Agency staff provides professional learning opportunities that engage practitioners in their learning. Personalized instruction is made available to district staff to address individual learning needs. District administrators' report technology training is provided when requested. Interviews with local district staff continually describe how the agency uses collaboration as an essential operating principal in the development and delivery of its services.

Interviews with agency staff and records kept by the agency report ample opportunities for staff members to participate in a continuous program of professional learning. Agency staff report that they are notified of opportunities for training through emails. Staff also reported that they would like to see follow up on

trainings.

Interview with local district staff indicate a need for more opportunities that focus on the development of instructional strategies that would increase and improve student engagement. The agency has formed a consortium to administer a common assessment program known as the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) purchased for all schools and grades in all local districts in the service area. MAP is purchased by the agency from the Northwest Evaluation Association. The agency provides individualized work sessions on how locals can use MAPS data to improve classroom instruction and align district curriculum. MAPS is also a formative assessment program that involves all schools and students and provides key achievement data that assists agency staff in providing on-site school improvement planning.

The agency has allocated resources and provided services necessary to support the purpose and vision in ensuring that constituent districts received the support that is requested. As evidenced by interviews with local district personnel there is clear evidence that the agency is responsive to the needs of the local district that it serves. The agency's budget shows a consistent approach for providing resources needed to carry on the purpose of the agency and assist each of its locals in achieving their core mission.

Personal observations indicate that the agency is providing a safe and clean environment for their employees and the district whose employees they serve. The agency has developed a long-range plan for facilities and a plan for fiscal continuity. There is also a written disaster plan and policy. The agency has a technology plan and the observed infrastructure is very adequate in supporting the agency's operational needs.

Interviews with staff indicate that the member schools have enough trust and confidence in the agency to allow access to their student assessment data. A data schedule has been created for the purpose of organizing the collection, analysis and use of data. This systematic process will aid in the agency's ability to analyze and use data to evaluate program effectiveness. It was reported through interviews with the Leadership Team that Focus Interviews have been implemented to evaluate the needs of the various schools within the service unit. The Adult Learner Evaluation Form has been implemented to determine the staff's perception of the effectiveness of professional development opportunities.

During the on-site review, members of the External Review Team evaluated the learning environment by observing classrooms and general operations of the institution. Using data from these observations, the team evaluated the quality of instruction and learning that took place classified around seven constructs or environments: equity, high expectations, support, engagement, progress monitoring and feedback, management, and use of technology.

The External Review Team would like to thank the ESU 17 for your hospitality, support and professionalism and the ability to speak with 61 individuals. We respect and acknowledge the efforts to improve the quality of your agency and we appreciate your honest assessment of your system.

In particular we would like to thank the leadership team for their assistance and staff members and local district personnel who allowed us to observe and tour their facilities and attended our interviews and

answered all of our questions.

The team sincerely wishes to thank the agency for the opportunity to learn from ESU 17 and develop a deeper understanding of systemic change and development in the context of great challenges. The agency service area consists of four sparsely-populated counties approximately 5,600 square miles in size with a population of 11,000 people, which has been steadily declining at a 1% rate. The five member school districts educate 1,586 students. The challenge of declining enrollment and distance among and between its constituent districts is met in a most adequate fashion by an agency staff dedicated to service to its member districts despite all challenges.

It is an honor for the External Team to recommend to the AdvancED Accreditation Commission that Educational Service Unit 17 be granted five year term accreditation.

Congratulations on your progress towards achieving System Accreditation.

Required Actions

1. Initiate a comprehensive evaluation process for all personnel; certificated and classified. The process should be consistent with Nebraska school law, and include both formative and summative evaluation that features professional growth goals based on specific timelines and feedback. The sole purpose of the evaluation process is based on continuous improvement for the purpose of improving overall agency effectiveness.

Primary Indicator or Assurance: 2.6

Interviews indicated a degree of informality and a need for greater specificity of the current personnel evaluation program. Personnel evaluation represents an opportunity to continually improve the skills of all individuals. Specific job targets or growth goals for all individuals creates a culture of continuous improvement for all staff.

2. Develop and initiate an evaluation process of programs and service to determine the impact on student and adult learning, cost-benefit analysis and the overall effectiveness of the agency.

Primary Indicator or Assurance: 5.1

Interviews indicated that the agency has initiated numerous new programs and services. Presently some degree of participant evaluation is conducted. Benchmark establishment was not in observance. Program evaluation that examines both qualitative and quantitative data along with a cost-benefit analysis provides a clear path to decision making, program development or program terminations. In its quest for continuous improvement the agency will be able to clearly document its data and decisions regarding its ongoing programs and initiatives.

3. Collect and analyze trend data that is synthesized and reported to determine the effectiveness of professional development opportunities, technology support and those designated programs related to improving student engagement and learning.

Primary Indicator or Assurance: 5.2

Continuous improvement of the essential services delivered to local districts relies on data that can be measured by establishing a standard of quality and determining the value of services. The team observed an informal process of assessing program value. The use of precise data clarifies program value.

Part III: Addenda

Next Steps

The institution should:

1. Review and discuss the findings from this report with all stakeholders.
2. Ensure that plans are in place to embed and sustain the strengths noted in the Powerful Practices section to maximize their impact on the institution.
3. Develop action plans to address the Required Actions made by the team. Include methods for monitoring progress toward the Required Actions.
4. Use the report to guide and strengthen the institution's efforts to improve student performance and system effectiveness.
5. Following the External Review, submit the Accreditation Progress Report detailing progress made toward addressing the Required Actions. Institutions are required to respond to all Required Actions. The Required Actions should be completed before the Accreditation Progress Report is submitted. The report will be reviewed at the state and national level to monitor and ensure that the system has implemented the necessary actions to complete the Required Actions. The accreditation status will be reviewed and acted upon based on the completion of the Required Actions and the resulting improvement.
6. Continue to meet the AdvancED accreditation standards, submit required reports, engage in continuous improvement, and document results.

Celebrating Accreditation

Following the External Review, the Team submits the final report to AdvancED for review and for action by the AdvancED Accreditation Commission, which confers accreditation and upon the institution. Upon receiving its accreditation, the institution should share its achievement with internal and external communities.

About AdvancED

In 2006, the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI), the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI), both founded in 1895, along with the National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE) came together to form AdvancED: one strong, unified organization dedicated to education quality. In 2011, the Northwest Accreditation Commission (founded 1917) joined NCA CASI and SACS CASI as part of AdvancED. AdvancED is the world's largest education community, representing 30,000 public and private schools and systems across the United States and in 75 countries worldwide and educating 16 million students. The Northwest Accreditation Commission joined the AdvancED network in 2011.

Today, NCA CASI, NWAC, and SACS CASI serve as accreditation divisions of AdvancED. Through AdvancED, NCA CASI, NWAC, and SACS CASI share research-based accreditation standards that cross state, regional, and national boundaries. Accompanying these standards is a unified accreditation process designed to help educational institutions continuously improve.